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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the influence of classroom experience on theoretical beliefs about reading as evidenced over a full year elementary classroom internship in a laboratory school setting. Five interns (three females who had just received their bachelors degrees and two males who held masters degrees and were engaged in other occupations prior to entering the program, enrolled in the Masters in Teacher Education program at Eastern Oregon State College during the 1993-94 school year, voluntarily participated in the study. Theoretical orientation was assessed four times during the intern year using the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile, which categorizes responses into a "phonics," "skills," or "whole language" orientation to reading. Results indicated that: (1) interns' beliefs began at the lower end of the "skills" orientation range in September, and were noticeably varied among individuals; (2) by December, mean scores moved more towards the middle of the skills orientation, and converged considerably among individuals, a trend most likely reflective of similar classroom experiences and orientations; (3) by March, mean scores rose only slightly and were still within the middle of the skills orientation, but variability among individuals increased, most likely reflective of the combination of "theory" and "practice"; and (4) by the end of the internship, mean scores remained virtually the same, still within the middle of the skills range, with variability among individuals decreasing somewhat. (Contains two tables and two figures of data.) (RS)

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Bridging Reading Theory and Practice: A Study of Interns' Beliefs

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs about reading have an influence on classroom practice. Investigations have focused on the nature of these beliefs, how they are formed, and the influence they have. This paper reports the results of a study into the formation of beliefs about reading. Subjects were pre-service elementary interns enrolled in a Masters in Teacher Education (MTE) program in a laboratory school setting. Discussion of results centers around the influence of college course work relative to reading and language arts, and the interplay with direct classroom experience.

The essential task faced by every teacher is that of making appropriate decisions regarding instructional materials and methods. Each class is different, and each child unique. Teachers are continually challenged to select the most meaningful and effective strategies available in order to maximize the learning of each student.

Basic to this task is the formulation of philosophical beliefs about the nature of the teaching and learning process. As discussed by Parkay and Stanford (1992), an awareness and understanding of philosophical beliefs guides the behavior of teachers. It is from this underlying philosophical belief that particular educational schools of thought emerge. For example, the philosophical belief system of Pragmatism leads to the educational school of thought known as progressivism. In the same way, tenants from both Realism and Idealism combine to form the educational belief known as essentialism, whereas Realism uninfluenced by Idealism leads to perennialism. Perennialism, essentialism, or progressivism; each educational belief system forms the basis for the specific decisions that teachers make on a day-by-day basis related to materials, methods, and content of instruction. In short, teachers' philosophical beliefs play a key role in determining the way in which teachers teach.

This process is particularly significant in the area of reading. Numerous instructional strategies, programs, and sets of materials are available for teachers to choose from when teaching reading. As May (1990) has stated, reading teachers are continually faced with such choices, which frequently must be made moment-by-moment. The question then becomes one of how teachers make such decisions related to reading instruction. When faced with the variety of competing ideas about appropriate methods and materials, how does the teacher decide? May argues that the teacher's view of the reading process influences the decisions the teacher makes, and thus influences the reading instruction.

Gove (1983) has argued in the same direction. She states that teachers have an implicit theoretical orientation, even though they are not always aware of such. She further suggests that teachers can profit instructionally if they are made aware of the theoretical orientation they posses.

Formal investigation into teachers' beliefs about reading and the reading process has been conducted by Bawden, Buike, and Duffy (1979). Using a combination of teacher surveys and classroom observations, they explored four aspects of teacher beliefs: (1) whether teachers possessed theoretical conceptions related to the nature of the reading process; (2) the nature of those theoretical concepts; (3) how those theoretical concepts develop; and (4) the degree to which those theoretical concepts guide the instructional process. Their investigation yielded the following general principles about teachers' theoretical conceptions about reading:

1. Teachers do formulate theoretical concepts about the reading process.
2. Most teachers generally posses more than one such theoretical conception.
3. Teachers often explain instructional decisions with "non-reading" theoretical conceptions.
4. Some teachers posses more complex theoretical reading conceptions than other teachers.
5. The stability of teachers' theoretical conceptions varies from teacher to teacher.
6. Teacher's theoretical conceptions may be influenced by the grade level taught and the ability levels of their students.
7. Teachers change their theoretical conceptions over time.

Combs and Yellin (1985) explored the relationship between beliefs and practices with pre-service elementary reading teachers. Among the factors they focused on were (1) beliefs about the reading process and (2) whether awareness of beliefs

would significantly change the degree of congruence between beliefs and practices. Their findings indicated that pre-service elementary teachers were (1) more divergent than similar in their orientation towards reading beliefs, and (2) did not significantly change the degree of congruence within either their beliefs or practices as a result of their awareness of their beliefs.

In a related train of investigation, this author has looked at pre-service elementary teachers' beliefs about reading as they relate to classroom practicum experiences. One such investigation (Evans, 1991) looked at differences in reading beliefs between students that completed a practicum experience prior to having completed a reading methods course as compared to similar students that completed the same reading methods course prior to the practicum experience. Results showed a significant difference between the two groups, and suggested that the practicum experience might influence the pre-service teachers' theoretical beliefs about reading.

In a follow-up investigation (Evans, 1991), the influence of classroom experience (in the form of practicum experience), with theoretical beliefs about reading was explored. Results were mixed, suggesting that the influence of classroom practice on theoretical beliefs with this particular sample was not simple or straightforward. One group appeared to have been influenced by the classroom experience while the other group was not.

To continue this line of investigation, this author designed the present study for purposes of looking at the possible influence of classroom experience on the theoretical beliefs about reading as evidenced over the course of a full-year elementary classroom internship with Masters in Teacher Education (MTE) students in a laboratory school setting.

Method

Subjects

Five interns enrolled in the Masters in Teacher Education program at Eastern Oregon State College during the 1993-94 school year voluntarily participated in the study . There were three females and two males. The three females were each in their mid-twenties, and had entered the MTE program the year immediately following receipt of their bachelors degrees. Of the two male interns, one was in his early thirties, and the other in his mid forties. Both held master's degrees, and had been engaged in other occupations prior to entering the MTE program.

Materials

Interns' beliefs about reading were assessed using the DeFord Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) (DeFord, 1985). The TORP instrument consists of 28 statements describing the reading process and methods of reading instruction. Participants respond to each statement by rating their degree of agreement/ disagreement using a five point scale. Scores are totaled to obtain an overall theoretical rating. The minimum total score is 28, and the maximum total score is 140. Scores falling between 40 and 65 are indicative of a "phonics orientation," scores between 66 and 110 indicate a "skills orientation," and scores between 111 and 140 indicate a "whole language" orientation.

Procedure

Theoretical orientation was assessed four times during the intern year: September, December, March, and May. Administration of the TORP instrument was conducted anonymously. Participants were identified only by code numbers of the individual's own choosing. Actual names of the individuals were kept separate from the TORP instruments.

The times for administration of the TORP were chosen to coincide with significant periods of the internship. The time from September to December is when interns are basically observers in the elementary classrooms. Although they may be doing some activities which involve them directly in the instructional process with students, such activities tend to be limited. It is also during this time that interns are enrolled in the first sequence of their own teacher education course work. In this first sequence of courses, topics covered include general teaching strategies, classroom management, and assessment techniques.

The time from December to March requires interns to significantly increase their involvement in the elementary classroom. They move from being observers to "part-time" teachers, in the process increasing their responsibility for planning and implementing instructional activities with both large and small groups of children. It is also during this time that interns enroll in the second phase of their teacher education course work. This period of course work covers specific areas of language development and reading/language arts instruction.

The final period, from March to May, is when interns become full-time teachers in the elementary classroom. They assume full responsibility for planning and implementing all aspects of the elementary classroom program, under the supervision of the supervising classroom teacher. They are not enrolled in any teacher education course work during this period.

Data Analysis

Scoring of all TORP instruments was done at the completion of the study. Descriptive statistics for each time-of-administration were calculated. Because participants were volunteers and were not randomly selected from a larger population, no inferential statistical procedures were employed.

Results

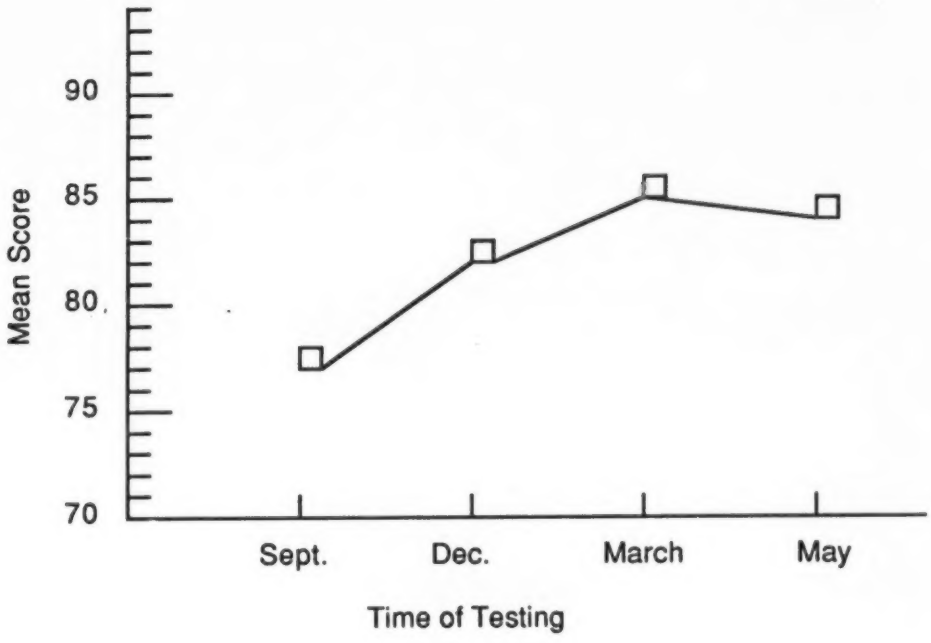
Mean group scores for each time-of-testing showed a gradual increase over the course of the internship year. The mean score for the September administration was 76.80. At the December administration, the mean score had increased to 81.80. The March mean scores indicated only a slight increase, rising to 85.40. The final mean scores from the May administration remained virtually unchanged at 85.00. Table 1 presents the mean scores for the four assessment periods. Figure 1 shows the means in graphic form.

Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Testing Times

Time of Testing	Mean	*SD*
September	76.80	11.80
December	81.80	4.66
March	85.40	10.43
May	85.00	8.83

Figure 1
Mean TORP Scores



As the means indicate, the overall trend was one of increasing TORP scores over the course of the internship. However, all mean scores remained within the range considered to be indicative of a "whole language" orientation.

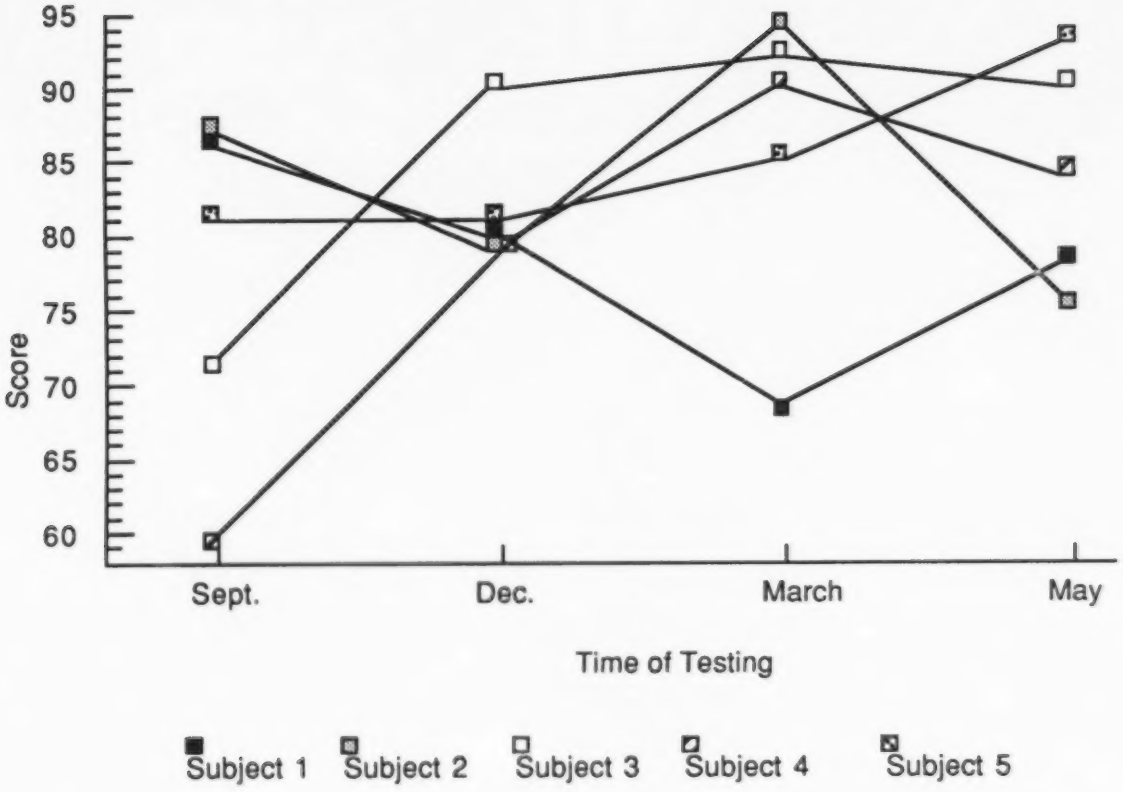
Examination of individual TORP scores reveals additional information. Table 2 presents the individual scores, and Figure 2 presents the scores in graphic form.

Table 2

Individual TORP Scores

	Time of Testing			
Subject	September	December	March	May
1	86.00	80.00	68.00	78.00
2	87.00	79.00	94.00	75.00
3	71.00	90.00	92.00	94.00
4	59.00	79.00	89.00	84.00
5	81.00	81.00	84.00	94.00

Figure 2
Individual TORP Scores



Examination of individual scores at the beginning of the internship (September) indicates a noticeable range of variability, from a high of 87.00 to a low of 59.00. Furthermore, when the individual September and December scores are compared, it is noticeable that two individuals showed rising scores, two showed declining scores, and one remained unchanged. In addition, individual scores at the December testing point evidenced considerably less variance as compared to the September scores. Scores in December ranged from a low of 79.00 to a high of 90.00.

Comparison of the scores between the second and third testing points (December and March) reveals that four individuals evidenced increasing scores, and one individual evidenced a declining score. When the range of scores is compared, it is apparent that the variability increased noticeably from December to March, with March scores ranging from a low of 68.00 to a high of 94.00.

Comparison of scores between the third and fourth testing periods (March and May), indicates that three subjects had rising scores and two subjects had declining scores. The range of scores at the fourth testing period was narrower than the range at the third testing period, with a low of 75.00 and a high of 94.00.

Overall, two subjects evidenced a consistent rising pattern over the internship period, with three subjects evidencing an inconsistent pattern of rising and falling scores. Three subjects had ending (May) scores higher than beginning (September) scores, and two subjects had ending scores lower than their beginning scores.

Discussion

The degree of variability in scores seen at the beginning of the internship was not unexpected. Interns enter the MTE program with a wide difference in experiences and understandings. Some have had prior experience working with children in educational settings, others have not. It is reasonable to assume that what they know

and believe about the reading process and instructional methods and materials is a result of numerous factors. For some, beliefs may have been shaped by methods used when they themselves were students in elementary classrooms. For others, beliefs may have formed from experiences of working with children in volunteer capacities, or from having been parents. Other beliefs may have come from the media, such as newspaper articles or television reports. And finally, it is possible that some beliefs may have been formed through self-reflection about their own reading habits.

It is also interesting to note that, with one exception, beginning scores were all within the "skills" orientation, as defined by the TORP criteria. Again, this may be a factor of the individual's own experience in how they were taught to read as a child. Given the ages of most interns in this study, they would have been elementary students themselves during the 1960' and 1970's, a period characterized by a"skills management" approach to reading.

From September to December, mean scores increased, moving more towards the "whole language" orientation. It is during this period that interns began their classroom observations and limited instructional responsibilities. Although interns were enrolled in teacher education course work during this period, the course work did not include a reading or language arts component. Thus, the most influential factor in beliefs about reading most likely came from what interns observed in their classroom settings. They saw how classroom teachers taught reading, the materials they used, and the orientation they practiced.

If, indeed, the classroom experience itself between September and December accounted for the greatest influence on the development of interns beliefs, then it is understandable why the range of scores narrowed considerably at the December testing period. Of the five volunteers in this study, all worked with classroom teachers

who were themselves fairly similar in their classroom practices about teaching reading. Of these five classroom teachers, the predominate approach was that of a literature-based program, emphasizing a balance of both the traditional reading "skills" and an emphasis on meaning. Indeed, two of the interns worked with the same classroom teacher for reading instruction, as a result of a team-teaching situation, thus both interns would have observed the same reading methodologies and materials. If the classroom experience did indeed influence reading beliefs, then it is understandable that the scores converged at the December testing point, with the convergence being reflective of a movement towards that of the classroom teacher's orientation and practice.

Between December and March, the pattern of scores evidenced a widening of variability. It was during this period that interns began formal teacher education course work in reading theory and language development. They also continued their elementary classroom responsibilities, and in most cases were expected to increase their elementary classroom teaching responsibilities. The widening of variability of the scores may indicate an increase in the amount of "uncertainty" in the minds of the interns, particularly if they were seeking the "real way" to teach reading. The teacher education course work in reading theory and language development during this time was taught predominately by two professors, both of which evidence a philosophical orientation more "whole language" than "skills" based. To some degree, this orientation was perceived by interns as more "theoretical" than "practical." That is to say, they sometimes felt that the information presented in the teacher education courses was not realistically reflective of what they were experiencing in the classroom classroom. If this was so, it may be that the period between December and March was reflective of a time of "sorting out" conflicting concepts or the perceived

dissonance between college class and actual elementary classroom.

Mean TORP scores remained virtually unchanged between the March and May testing periods. However, the variability of the scores narrowed somewhat at the May assessment point. The period between March and May was when each intern assumed full responsibility for planning and implementing the elementary classroom instruction. Interns did not take college courses during this time. As with the scores from the December assessment, direct classroom experience may have served to influence beliefs. Although each intern was free to plan and teach largely independent of the classroom teacher during this time, it is safe to say that the instructional methods and materials employed by interns still reflected the influence of the classroom teacher. This residual influence may account for the converging trend of the scores, with the "independence" given the interns accounting for the fact that the convergence of belief scores was not as great in May as it was in December (the two testing points most closely reflective of the classroom experience portion of the internship not closely tied to reading and language arts course work.)

In summary, interns beliefs began at the lower end of the "skills" orientation range in September, and were noticeably varied between individuals. By December, mean scores moved more towards the middle of the "skills" orientation, and converged considerably between individuals, a trend most likely reflective of similar classroom experiences and orientations. By march, mean scores rose only slightly and were still within the middle of the "skills" orientation, but variability between individuals had increased, most likely reflective of the combination of "theory" and "practice." Finally, by the end of the internship, mean scores remained virtually the same, still within the middle of the "skills" range, with variability between individuals decreasing somewhat, most likely attributable again to similar classroom experiences and practices.

In considering areas for future investigation, it would be interesting to know what factors influence interns' initial beliefs. Investigation of this with individual interns, perhaps in an interview setting, would yield interesting insights. Perhaps initial beliefs are reflective primarily of how the individual was taught to read in elementary school. Perhaps it is a result of experience. Or perhaps a result of personal insight. This is suggested as an area for future study.

Furthermore, this study of design employed a quantitative design. Investigation using a qualitative approach would yield additional information useful in studying the influence of classroom experience on theoretical orientations.

Finally, this study was conducted with a limited number of individuals, in a particular setting, and no attempt was made made to generalize to a larger population. Replication with larger samples, and over several school years, would likely produce results of interest.

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